

Part 4: Mark Penn interview conducted by Dr. Michael Cornfield [May 15, 2019]

Speaker 1 is Mark Penn and Speaker 2 is Michael Cornfield

Speaker 1:

Your photo [inaudible 00:00:02].

Speaker 2:

Which is? [crosstalk 00:00:03] No.

Speaker 1:

So you see that picture there, right?

Speaker 2:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

So that's Gore and Clinton and they were on separate buses, but we came together somewhere in the middle of, I don't remember, Kentucky or something like that. Right. And for a brief time. So then they all wanted to know like what was going on with the poll. So we went into the bathroom and I had to do a poll briefing while they were going to the bathroom.

Speaker 2:

Oh, how embarrassing.

Speaker 1:

And then, I quite remember quite distinctly we posed for a picture, right-

Speaker 2:

In the bathroom?

Speaker 1:

In the bathroom. And I kind of, I think that they kind of edited the picture out [crosstalk 00:00:51].

Speaker 2:

They probably don't want that in circulation, don't you think?

Speaker 1:

Oh, that's a picture of a lifetime.

Speaker 2:

Wow. So this is a little bit of a digression. What do you think of psychographics? Because a friend of mine, [Maricio Amora 00:01:14], runs a shop Idea, I-D-E-A, there's an extra letter in there. And he's using some of the techniques that Cambridge Analytica did, so he's getting tarred because anything that they

did is wrong. I'm not so sure. What's your opinion of the ocean differentiation of personality types? And my friend says he doesn't use personally identifiable information, but-

Speaker 1:

Well, first of all, are we on the record or off the record?

Speaker 2:

I can do it off the record.

Speaker 1:

[inaudible 00:01:53].

Speaker 2:

So talk about the neuro psychology.

Speaker 1:

The neuro poll [crosstalk 00:01:58].

Speaker 2:

The neuro poll, okay.

Speaker 1:

So one of the things we did as a benchmark effort for President Clinton and then later would repeat it for Gore and for Hillary Clinton is what we later called the neuro poll or the neuro personality poll. And so what we would do would be a very long poll, like an hour or sometimes an hour and a half, sometimes we'd call people back to finish it. And we'd ask them about all of their attitudes towards politics and then all of their general lifestyle. What do they watch? What do they see? Do they go fishing, bowling, hockey? Right? What are the all the things that they do in their life? What then are some of their social attitudes towards things?

Speaker 1:

And then finally we would also give them a kind of mini version of the Myers-Briggs personality test. And then we would classify the voters into the basic personality types. And we would look to see was there a relationship between political views, lifestyle activities and personality type. And mostly there wasn't, but occasionally there was. And so you shouldn't think that just because you correlate everything means that everything correlates. But we would find, one of the big findings out of the neuro poll was that swing voters tended to be more sensing voters who wanted information in more bite size, right? So between someone who's more intuitive wants kind of a big theory of things or big proposals, like we're going to reform healthcare, but the more sensing voters that were more of the swing voters, they wanted more of the bite sized, manageable elements.

Speaker 1:

And so part of the underpinning of moving to bite sized policies was the result of the neuro poll that showed how swing voters were more likely to be personality types that better digested more manageable, more concrete kinds of proposals. Whether it's zero tolerance towards guns, or [inaudible

00:04:23] school uniforms or [crosstalk 00:04:25]. Those were not, "Oh I'm going to take, I'm going to have a plan to clean up the entire Internet." They were instead specific rifle shot policies and it reflected some of the findings of this poll. And then another thing was that swing voters tended to like fishing. So that was the Genesis of don't go to Martha's Vineyard, go out there on kind of an outdoors national park trip.

Speaker 1:

Right. That's more mainstream into that kind of personality type. But we used all of these things. People think that they have invented the wheel. Somehow now they've created personality type. Somehow now they've found swing voters or base politics. We did not have the easy technology that allowed kind of the swirling about of millions of bits of data as easily as they have today. But we had basic concepts down and were applying them certainly in the '96 election. And we had a contingency plan for if the election were to get close where we have isolated the 82 counties in America that would be the most important. We had then done a Claritas analysis of all of the lifestyle segments within those and we had an extensive program that didn't get launched because it was only an emergency program. Because really finely targeted stuff only comes into play when the elections close.

Speaker 1:

When the election is farther away, if you're keeping five plus points away, then you're better off relying primarily on mass communications. When you get into a two or three point range then targeting as finely as that would make a lot more sense.

Speaker 2:

So if you were advising a candidate in a close race today 20 years later, would you make use of that kind of Myers-Briggs neuro personality poll to squeeze out some extra votes?

Speaker 1:

Well, I'd do the poll. Again, I caution that just because you do the poll doesn't mean that you have actionable findings. I once did this really, Jay Rockefeller was running for governor, we had limited resources. I did every Claritas cluster of personality type in the world. And you know what, it turned out whether you were a coal miner in your family or not was just the most important variable and don't bother with the rest. So sometimes complexity for the sake of complexity doesn't make sense. But sometimes there's gold and then there are hills. And sometimes you hit upon a clear relationship between personality type and kinds of communication that would work better among swing voters and then that can come into play.

Speaker 2:

So how would you know when to take that tool out? I mean, you've given me the circumstantial, it's a close race. But when would you sense that personality analysis might pan out to keep with your mining metaphor?

Speaker 1:

I think if you're going to do it, you have to do it relatively early because you're going to need time to build up to show any real difference in a communications path on personality type, unless you're going to just change for general personality, it takes time because it takes repeated hits. If you do it the week before, it's not going to be quite useful. If you do it six or eight months out and it shows something

actionable then it can be useful. But this kind of thing, this is really what Facebook does behind the scenes. Behind the scenes, they're creating personality types and in the very same way, using all of your personal data in order to do a better job behind the scenes optimizing the advertisements that people give them.

Speaker 2:

And does it inform not just who to talk to and when to talk to them, but what to say? Would you phrase a message differently for a different personality type?

Speaker 1:

Sure. You definitely, it's not even just what to say, but it's how to say it. And so that's where again, you might be broad and sweeping with one personality type and you may be very concrete. Certain personality types are fundamentally more skeptical and digest information differently. So that's important. I don't think personality type will likely relate to a particular issue as much as personality type will relate to a particular style of campaigning and communication. And look, I wouldn't underrate this or overrate it in an election. Issue positions come first. The qualifications and ability of the candidates are incredibly strong. And these things can help on the margin in a super close race.

Speaker 2:

That makes sense. Okay. So I have some questions that pertain to the very first memo in those four volumes that you've deposited at Gelman, which was January 8th, 1997 the mood of the country memo, which preceded the inaugural address, the state of the union and the budget. And we've talked in past interviews about the politics in the situation and the philosophy and about techniques, which is why this first question, even though it wasn't tied to that, which was on point. So one of the things that leaps out to me when I look through your polls and in this polls is this issues in the news where you seek knowledge about voter cognizance of various issues and the impact on President Clinton's favorability. Talk about how you invented that and what that tool is really good at and what some some big strikes were with that approach.

Speaker 1:

So during the campaign and then after the campaign, we held weekly meetings. And what's in those books are really the agenda that might be handed out for the meeting and it would contain a summary of key poll and other information. And early on in the campaign we said, "There's a beltway and the Washington Post is covering stuff and there's outside the beltway, and what people are generally kind of kind of hearing in the headlines." So we tried to see a disconnect between the two and were we overreacting to the beltway and under-reacting to the public. So later on what I did was develop a polling technique where I would take the five or six things that happened in the week that were of some significance and asked people if they'd heard of it, knowing that 20% will say they've heard if I said, "Did you hear about last week's train wreck?"

Speaker 1:

Probably 20% will say yes to that question, whether there was a train wreck or not. But generally when you got above the twenties into the forties or the fifties, then that was kind of genuine penetration of the issue, and then did it make you more or less favorable. And then that would give you that sense of the dynamic of the week, if the five or six things that people heard about, many of them you thought they heard about and you discovered nobody heard about it because it was our White House event that

nobody heard about. Or as we always used to joke, any story related to sex, amazing penetration, anything related to pensions and worker training, that would never penetrate. But this then became something that every week, what is the American public hearing and how is that potentially affecting how we're doing in a kind of very simple, straightforward format, it became a weekly feature.

Speaker 2:

And so this would point out opportunities for initiatives, for visits, for statements, for if you got a high recognition plus a high potential impact on paper-ability, you knew that of all the things that had happened in the previous week, this one was something that was worth addressing.

Speaker 1:

Well and also as a bit of a report card. So you kind of look and say, "Some events are out of our control and some of the events are in our control. So to the extent they are in our control or out of our control, but we reacted well to them it was sort of a not just, "Hey, let's keep going with this issue," it was also a report card on how we did last week.

Speaker 2:

That seems to me to be a very useful approach. Do you happen to know whether those who succeeded you as in the White House as pollsters or for that matter, governors or any other sort of executive position have incorporated this technique?

Speaker 1:

Interestingly, I guess today people substitute kind of kind of what's going on on social media for this. The whole idea of this was not to be selective into just the beltway or one group or another, but to really get a national read on it. And I expect actually this is underused. That a lot of people could benefit by in office getting a report card every week.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. And with social media, you lose distribution, you lose the representative sample.

Speaker 1:

Right. Well, we know that what happens with social media is not representative. [crosstalk 00:14:25]

Speaker 2:

Right, right. So social media would not be an adequate substitute for this kind of question.

Speaker 1:

But if you asked me what are they doing, they're substituting social media.

Speaker 2:

Okay. Yeah, that makes sense.

Speaker 1:

I think to their detriment because then they exaggerate the importance of social media.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, I agree. Just point of clarification. When you were doing these polls in the White House, these were all adults? These were all voters? What was the universe?

Speaker 1:

We usually did voters. I think we did registered voters [inaudible 00:14:58] sample.

Speaker 2:

Okay. Okay. There was a section in this memo and then also in the February 6th, 1997 memo, a great deal of attention to the balanced budget amendment. I don't remember the history well enough, but you did a lot of probing to see what arguments would work, what arguments would not work, what would persuade voters that this was not such a great idea. Talk about both the technique and the context for the concerned about the balanced budget amendment.

Speaker 1:

Well, at that time the president was outlining what the vital center really meant. And so the extent that he was now at president of the vital center, the vital center was all about a combination I think of achieving some progressive goals along the lines of better education and better healthcare and more equitable distribution of benefits with the kind of enforcement and toughness on crime and particularly fiscal responsibility. And so we were kind of probing, part of what I did at the meetings was kind of look for ideas that were consistent with his philosophy that maybe there was a lot of public support for it that maybe he decided to get behind. And so I did a bunch of probing on that, kind of pushing that maybe that would be the time to really make a push for that.

Speaker 1:

In the end, that did not become the focus. What did become the focus was as the surplus was building up the social security lockbox became a focus, which was a different kind of a measure, but it still was basically a fiscal responsibility measure. Now at the time, remember getting to a balanced budget was the initial policy that he backed that transformed the view of him as a centrist president instead of having drifted to the left. And so when he supported a balanced budget, according to our values, that was really a tremendous element here in his negotiations with Gingrich. And they even did get to a balanced budget, which no one really including themselves expected to get to. As miraculous as that seems sitting here today in 2019.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. Yeah. When you were asking, when you were running respondents through a series of pretty nuanced pros and cons on an argument, how do you keep them sharp and focused so that you know that the findings are valid? I mean you really went into more detail on this in this particular poll and I understand why now, but others when you're asking, you would ask about issue positions, which is what I see to be the norm. And this is really in depth.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Because if you're really considering a proposal, then I considered the voters to be rational. So if you think about the personality typing, I believe that there are core personality types. But

fundamentally, almost all this polling, my outlook is based on the voters being much more rational than anybody gives them credit for.

Speaker 2:

So you trust them to be able to maintain this in their heads. [crosstalk 00:19:03].

Speaker 1:

Well I trust them when they go to McDonald's to decide whether or not they want pickles, lettuce, tomato, mustard, or mayonnaise. Okay?

Speaker 2:

Yes. Good analogy.

Speaker 1:

And so I test out the pickle, the mustard, the mayo, right? And I see which of the elements of the policy sandwich make a policy unacceptable, enhance the policy, bring in a group you didn't get, right? And so I believe that that kind of in depth issue testing is fundamentally missing from a lot of political analysis. Because what most people will do is just kind of throw in a question that kind of backs their ideological position and they won't really probe the ins and outs of it and they won't also then give someone a negotiating hand.

Speaker 1:

Right? So let's say he'd know that one feature was more important than another. Let's say he was negotiating to maybe get a balanced budget amendment passed, right? How are you going to make ... so in a balanced budget amendment, you have a bunch of economists who say that it's counterproductive. We need to have a deficit according to GDP. You have this whole element of whether you should have a capital budget or not and separate out expenses. Every issue, I mean the balanced budget is a complicated issue, but even a simple issue is very complicated or could be. And a lot of polling that was done if you went through it, whenever we were seriously looking at things, we'd go through all the arguments pro and con, we'd go through all the features in and out, and voters have opinions and some things make a difference, some things don't.

Speaker 1:

Right. So understanding that is critical because it may not make a difference to the public but it might make a huge difference to the press or to the policy makers. And so a lot of this polling, which I think was unique in that sense, it's very in depth-ness is what was unusual. And it wasn't in depth from the point of view of like somebody who does a climate change poll today. They start out with something like, "How concerned are you with climate change? Very concerned, super concerned, incredibly concerned." They basically tilt the whole poll from question one, right? Because they've told you their focus. They don't say what are the most important issues today. Right. They immediately focus on what they want, and then they immediately then spoonfeed a bunch of things consistent with what they want to get out of the poll and they don't really explore the other side

Speaker 2:

So when you take the time and the care to run voters through this, even if it takes 10 minutes, you find on the whole that they appreciate it and that they're up for it.

Speaker 1:

Yes. Voters in America have an opinion on virtually everything. They're sophisticated. They will go in depth with you on these issues. And also what you're really doing is going from uninformed opinion to informed opinion or how opinion is likely to come out after a public debate. So you could have, everybody in the world could say, "I love the Paris Accords. Paris, it's a wonderful city and of course they're really probably pretty nice." And then you get down to, "Well, okay, the Paris Accords mean that you're going to have to put a 25 cent gasoline tax on things. Now you like the Paris Accord?" "No, what are you kidding?" So understanding the details that would come out in a public-

Speaker 2:

Trade offs.

Speaker 1:

... now tells you, and that was always in those days, healthcare was the big issue. Do I want health care for everybody? Sure. But then as the debate would play out in terms of have your own doctor, what's the government paying for? How much choice do you have? Running through all those subsets then tells you where the public is likely to come out after the true debate. And so that understanding where the public would come out after a true debate on an issue and also understanding where you could negotiate different elements with everyone is absolutely critical to polling being useful in ways that most people cannot imagine.

Speaker 2:

For it to be useful, you have to have a receptive audience. Right? And in the president and the vice president, presumably other members of the White House team, they were appreciative of this type of detailed information. And that seemed to be pretty rare, wasn't it?

Speaker 1:

Well, that's why I always did best with what I call egghead clients. My very first client, I was the CEO of an oil company, gave us hour long presentation about the state of the industry, their image, etc. Had a rather animated conversation afterwards with the head of communications. And I asked the head of communications, "Well, what stimulated that animated discussion after my presentation?" He said, "Well, he just wanted to know where his Superbowl tickets were." That was not my kind of client. Right. Clinton was a great synthesizer. He wanted to be able to absorb all of this information to help him make better decisions. Bill Gates, same thing. So my clients tended to be, or Tony Blair, tended to be not kind of the rough and tumble Jersey City politicians, they tended to be super smart clients who could absorb this level of information and put it to good use.

Speaker 1:

And if you couldn't, you likely didn't need my services anyway and it wasn't going to mesh. But with those clients, and remember those clients see so many different issues that the polling is helping them make a better decision. That's helping point them in certain directions with this information. Whereas simpler, less eggheaded clients, they don't care. They don't care about these nuances. Right.



Speaker 2:

Yeah. Yeah. You messaged tested the phrase balance deal. This was before I guess the inaugural address and it didn't come out so great. But I mean apart from weeks in which a big speech was looming, did you do a lot of message testing, and talk about that. Where did that phrase come from and that sort of thing?

Speaker 1:

We sort of invented message testing through this process. Most "polls" and most market research is attribute testing. So if you look at most research, there'll be Mars Candy, there'll be 20 different attributes, chewy, nutty, whatever, caloric, and people, you get a bunch of ratings. So people really hadn't taken 10 messages, tested them, and then scored them, and then scored them with swing voters. And not taking the same kind of detailed approach that we did on the policies can very easily impact. My company went on to make a pretty good business out of this whole message testing thing for many years because A, you needed intellectual people who could create all the messages and then you have to interpret the testing and the testing results will always weren't that easy to test because there's an infinite number of words.

Speaker 2:

Right. So where did the phrase come from? Did you sort of poke around the White House? Did you come up with it when you were testing phrases?

Speaker 1:

50/50. Most of the stuff we would come up with, but sometimes he would do something. I mean I think our most famous kind of testing like that was Bridge to the 21st Century. Right? And we all thought we were geniuses that we had come up with Bridge to the 21st Century, and it tested off the charts [crosstalk 00:27:18] stuff, the highlight of his convention speech one day. One day a couple of years later, I may have told you, I looked back and I found that phrase in his earlier convention speech. And it's like the speech that bombed in-

Speaker 2:

The one that he went on and on and on and on. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

I found that-

Speaker 2:

Then he went on Johnny Carson and made fun of himself about. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

I found that phrase in that speech.

Speaker 2:

There you go.

Speaker 1:

And I couldn't figure out for the life of me of how, what ... I couldn't remember what discussion might have taken place so that we got that back into the poll. But we all thought we had come up with that. And I'm quite sure in retrospect, he must have mentioned it in a way that we picked up on it and put it in.

Speaker 2:

There you go. And then another one, the end of big government does not mean an end to activist government, which is a nice phrase in that it picks up on the earlier big theme from the previous. So again, that just percolated up somewhere and you tested it and it worked.

Speaker 1:

So I had a process kind of going to people, most of the message stuff we really came up with. But then I'd go and visit the DPC folks and I visited maybe some cabinet and I kind of scanned for policy ideas. And so you'd see policy ideas percolating up from people and then message ideas usually we in our little group would percolate on those and see how they tested. And like I said, the thing about message testing is even if you don't like the one that actually tests really well, you can modify it and come close or understand the pattern.

Speaker 2:

Sometimes in the weekly memos you would include press reaction, excerpts from columnists or television pundits. But there was no data of the sort that a public relations firm, well, of the 30 top press organizations, seven were favorable. Talk about why you preferred the sort of the excerpting instead of using-

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Well that was before I ran a PR firm.

Speaker 2:

Okay. That's a simple answer.

Speaker 1:

So if I ran a PR firm, I might've had the kind of metrics that come out in the daily report. I mean I was more a believer in the poll based findings. And again, some weeks we wouldn't have a poll so I'd have to make judgment ...

Speaker 2:

Yeah, I don't know what that is.

Speaker 1:

It's either thunder or something worse.

Speaker 2:

Maybe a plane.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

So it was a plane because I don't see any rain or thunder.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, I would say that I hadn't run a PR firm, probably was not as sophisticated in that area as I might've been, right, in terms of kind of doing a set analysis of a [inaudible 00:30:28], and tracking say a set of columnists and kind of ranking them. We didn't really do that as- [crosstalk 00:30:35]

Speaker 2:

But now that you run a PR firm, do you do that or do you find that sort of limited use?

Speaker 1:

Today we get this kind of a sentiment analysis. I really think the unique aspect here was trying to get away from the inside measures that people are too familiar with, to the outside measures. What does the American public that you don't really see really think.

Speaker 2:

Breaking outside of [crosstalk 00:31:01].

Speaker 1:

Right. And that was the key to the work that we were doing. Getting outside that.

Speaker 2:

Okay. When you were doing pre-state of the union address testing, you asked people about, and I counted, 14 goals and 56 initiatives.

Speaker 1:

Sad.

Speaker 2:

How can you do that? How can you ask people about, are you doing split samples?

Speaker 1:

We are doing split samples on that. Even I would recognize that that would numb a typical voter, but that was ... so we would-

Speaker 2:

And I know that the state of the union addresses are laundry lists and I know that they do have dozens of things in there, but so is split sample.

Speaker 1:

But this was a powerful process again, within the White House, to take everybody's ideas, put them in a poll like that, get a score. Here's where we would use the D + I - R scoring to find those issues that Democrats and independents favored but ticked off Republicans. And this became kind of a major focus of helping winnow down. Again, my work was not the be all and end all to it, but it was very helpful in taking kind of a mass of information and trying to prioritize it.

Speaker 1:

And the same thing on the goals. I think I might've told you this story that one year, one of the deputy, one of the, what are they called? Deputy assistants didn't like this process of the state of the union. She didn't like the idea that we polled all of these things. And so she tried to do without polling and sure enough, she got about three quarters into the process and it was a mess without the polling. She couldn't prioritize all the different elements and everybody's screaming to try to get their thing in the state of the union. And so then we went back to doing the polls. We started a little late, but the president then said like, "Where's all the polling on this?"

Speaker 2:

Right, right. So it really is an effective decision making [crosstalk 00:33:11].

Speaker 1:

It's an aid. It's an aid. I never want people to think that we polled it and so we did it and that's the way the president ... it's strategic input, one of many. Right? But a valuable one. And when you omit the voice of the people from this thing, I think you make a mistake, you get off track and you don't really understand how to even package or communicate those policies that you care passionately about.

Speaker 2:

Right, right. Was there ever an instance where you reported back that the public was lukewarm towards something but the president still wanted to push it anyway? Can you think of an example of that? And did? Or would he pretty much, and I realize it's one factor among many, but I'm just wondering if there were occasions where he just said, "Well to heck with it, I'm going forward with this anyway."

Speaker 1:

All the time. I mean, I don't think ... he was poll fascinated but not entirely poll driven in that sense. [crosstalk 00:34:33] get the opposite. There were a couple of controversial issues. Needle exchange was sort of ... there were a couple of ones where he did follow and needle exchange was one where I think the polling was pretty powerful that the public was against it, but the policy folks and Shalala really thought it was important. And so I think he for a time held the line on needle exchange but then reversed it later.

Speaker 2:

So where I'm going with this, that was sort of a set up question. I'm not going for a profiles in courage moment. I'm going to you recognizing, okay, despite the initial low favorability or low appreciation or even low recognition of this issue, he wants to push this. So now I will shift and I will use some of my other tools. I will do argument testing.

Speaker 1:

Oh well that was all the time.

Speaker 2:

That was all the time?

Speaker 1:

That was all the time. What I would try to think about is like what was he interested in? What was on his mind? How can I help him solve the problem he was doing? So I mean to some extent I would be putting that, go back to my food analogy. So to some extent I would view these meetings as well, I'll put out a buffet and I'll see which ones he'll eat. And to another extent though, what I always used to say is the president never had to tell me what questions to ask because I would know what questions he would need the answers to. And that was really my goal.

Speaker 2:

And how would you know?

Speaker 1:

Well, I would know by studying what's going on in the country, by talking to the aides and those around him to get an under ... and so between those two things, I'd get an understanding of where he is going to be thinking. [crosstalk 00:36:24] be thinking about how am I going to handle this response to Newt Gingrich? How am I going to push forward this education? What is he really thinking and what does he need the answer to? What's the difficult problem he's confronting? And that's how the meetings were surprisingly relevant. Right. And so it was rare that the president would call up and say, "Give me a poll on this." Right. He would expect that when he sat down for dinner it would be there.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. Yeah. I noticed back to that mood of the country poll that you reported the approval ratings, not just for the president and vice president, but for the First Lady. Do you think that was unique among presidential pollsters?

Speaker 1:

No, I think the First Lady would, in any administration, she gets some polling. We always treated it delicately. We didn't like ... we did it only occasionally. If it was bad news we would [inaudible 00:37:30] it in the agenda. There was often always a confidential page that went to the president only. So there would be some things that would be too sensitive for the group meeting. And so I didn't think given everything that was going on now, Hillary's image there in that time by '97 was climbing up. Right. It'd really taken a battering in the '92, '93 health care phase, and now you're in the it takes a village kind of more ... she wasn't quite, I wouldn't call her centrist yet, but kind of reflecting a kind of a good and growing image about her wanting to make a better life for kids. So I think that was done occasionally. It wasn't a regular feature of it and we wouldn't normally have put it out there on the agenda unless it was-

Speaker 2:

Okay, good. Okay, so that's all I have for the tape recorder.